

Gap land swap could take at least 1 year

Public will have chance for input, state official says

BY AL WINN
Of Our Lebanon Bureau

FORT INDIANTOWN GAP • Within two months, the Pennsylvania National Guard will decide whether it wants to go ahead with a land swap that would add about 2,100 acres of Pennsylvania Game Commission land on the north side of Second

Mountain to Fort Indiantown Gap.

With reviews by the Pennsylvania Game Commission and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service required after any formal proposal by the National Guard, it could be at least a year before any exchange takes place, officials told about 100 people at a meeting last night.

In exchange for a 7-mile strip of land on the north side of Second Mountain, the National Guard would buy land near DeHart Reservoir from the city of Harrisburg and turn it over to the Game Commission.

The Gap would use its land as a buffer zone for a tank firing range

being built on the south side of Second Mountain. A buffer zone is needed, said Col. Ray Hulings, the base commander, because of the range of the 120 mm guns being used on M-1 tanks.

The shells would be fired parallel to the top of the mountain, but some could ricochet over the crest into what is now Game Commission land, Hulings said.

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WHAT'S THE NEXT STEP?

If the National Guard pushes ahead with the land swap, it will submit a proposal to the Pennsylvania Game Commission. The proposal would specify the land the commission would get in exchange for the Harrisburg land. Before the commission board voted, there would be an opportunity for public input.

If the Game Commission board approves it, there will be a review by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which would probably include an environmental assessment.

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Without the buffer zone, Pennsylvania National Guard troops would have to travel to Fort Dix, N.J., and Fort Drum, N.Y., for training, Hulings said. "Time traveling is not time spent training on weapons," he said.

"No deal has been cut. No one is trying to hide anything," said Scott Klinger, director of land management for the Game Commission.

There would be plenty of opportunity for public input before a decision was made, Klinger said.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is involved, agency wildlife biologist Paul O'Neil said, because 75 percent of the money used to buy the game lands came from the federal government. The agency would insist that any land the Game Commission received in exchange would be of at least equal quality, he said.

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Guard officials stressed several times last night that the land the National Guard wants would stop short of Stony Creek and would affect neither the creek nor the rail-trail north of the creek.

"We're never, never going to limit access to Stony Creek," Hulings said.

Guard officials discussed several ways, including deed restrictions, to guarantee that the land they want would remain essentially as it is today. "We are open to putting it in writing," said Dennis Gulse, chief counsel for the state Department of Military and Veterans Affairs.

Another possibility, Hulings said, would be an agreement with a conservancy group to manage the land. The Nature Conservancy manages 220 acres of Fort Indiantown Gap land set aside to protect the rare regal fritillary butterflies.

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